

Noh Yôkihi 楊貴妃

(The Chinese Beauty “Yang Guifei”)

The Chinese Tang dynasty emperor Gensô is grief-stricken due to the death of his favorite mistress Yôkihi, whom he has put to death following the wishes of his military advisors. He commissions a Taoist to find her whereabouts in the afterlife. The Taoist finds her on the mythical island of Hôrai where she tells her story with a sense of bittersweet nostalgia. The Taoist asks for something to take back to the Emperor as proof of their meeting and she gives him a jeweled crown. When pressed further, she tells the Taoist of a secret pledge between them, then dances for him after which the Taoist departs. In Japan, Yôkihi is considered one of the three great beautiful women in world history along with Cleopatra representing the West, and Ono no Komachi representing Japan.

Author: Komparu Zenchiku (1405-1470?).

Scene: The Tang dynasty reign of the Chinese emperor Gensô (Chinese: Xuanzong; r.713-756), the Palace of Great Purity in Hôrai, the land of immortality.

Category: Third category woman (true wig) play, phantasm (*mugen*) noh in one act, *jo-no-mai* (slow, elegant dance) piece, without *taiko* stick drum.

Performance practice: Performed by all five schools.

CHARACTERS: (in order of appearance)

Waki (secondary actor): A Taoist versed in the arts of magic and sorcery in the service of Emperor Gensô.

Ai/Ai-kyôgen (interlude actor): A resident of Hôrai.

Shite (main actor): The spirit of Yôkihi, the former empress of Emperor Gensô. Mask: young woman (*waka-onna*, *zô-onna* or *ko-omote*).

SYNOPSIS: Scene-by-Scene

Stage attendants place a cloth-covered framework structure on stage to represent a palatial residence. The *Shite* is hidden inside.

1. *Waki entrance:* A Taoist enters to *shidai* music and announces himself as in the service of Emperor Gensô who loved Yôkihi, his consort of unmatched beauty. Certain events however brought about her death, and the Emperor, overcome with grief, has charged him with finding her spirit in the afterlife. He is now travelling to the island of Hôrai, the Island of Immortality. He sings a travel song then announces his arrival.

2. *Waki/Ai exchange*: A resident of Hôrai tells him of a woman called the Jade Princess who deeply yearns for the Chinese court she has left behind. She lives, he says, in a palace in the woods in the Residence of Great Purity.

3. *Waki exclamation*: The Taoist tells of going to the palace and remarks on its magnificence even more splendid than the greatest palaces of China.

4. *Shite lament*: From inside the covered framework, Yôkihi sings of viewing the spring blossoms in the gardens of the Chinese palace, the transience of life, the moonlight, and her tears as she recalls the past.

5. *Waki/Shite exchange*: The Taoist announces himself and inquires after the Jade Princess. She describes how she parts the flower curtains and raises the jeweled blind. Together, they describe her cloud-like hair, her flower-like face, and her tear-filled eyes. The chorus describes her incomparable loveliness which surpasses branches of pear blossoms glittering with rain.

6. *Waki/Shite exchange*: The Taoist tells how distraught the Emperor has been after her death, and how he has been sent to find her in the afterlife. Yôkihi sings of the memories which destroy her soul. The Taoist asks for a keepsake of his visit to take to the Emperor and she gives him a hair jewel, then reveals a pledge a vow they made to each other to be “in heaven, twin birds that share a wing, and on earth, twin trees which intertwine.”

7. *Shite prelude dance*: Yôkihi offers to reenact a dance of long ago. She retrieves the hair jewel (*monogi* costume change) and sings that all is but a play of fantasy and a lonely butterfly dance. She dances an *iroe* color dance.

8. *Shite's narrative dance*: With the chorus, Yôkihi refers to the eternal cycle of birth and death and fate's wretchedness. The chorus goes on to sing of how their ties were broken, how sad her present existence is alone, and how those who meet must also part.

9. *Shite's dance*: Yôkihi dances the elegant *jo-no-mai*, described as the dance of the feather robes.

10. *Conclusion*: The stage attendants remove the hair jewel which she returns to the Taoist as he takes his leave. She says how it was all but a fleeting world of sorrow. The chorus describes her tears as she reenters the palace. [Richard Emmert]